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Hard Work Beats Talent When Talent Doesn't Work Hard

I first decided to play volleyball the summer of my fifth grade year. I don't even know why I decided to play. I just wanted to, I guess. The first day of tryouts, I noticed that everyone else had knee pads on and I didn't. When I got home I thought, *I'll bring my rollerblading knee pads with tomorrow so I don't stand out as much.* Boy I am I lucky that I forgot to put those knee pads in my bag!

Flash forward to my eighth grade year. I got bumped up to the C-2 squad because there was a lack of girls playing. I wasn't terrible, but I there was one skill I especially struggled with: serving. That summer I spent hours upon hours in my driveway serving against my garage door. Any spare time I had I would drag my mom outside to practice peppering with me. When she got sick of that, I would serve even more. I lifted weights and went to volleyball camps. I ate, slept, and breathed volleyball.

The following fall I was able to make JV and even dress varsity. I was excited but also shocked. *How did this happen? I was on the C-2 squad last year!* One of my teammates asked me, "How do you go from C-2 to Varsity in a year?" and all I could respond with was, "I have no idea!"

Looking back, I know that that summer was a key in my high school volleyball career. As a middle schooler, let's be real, I sucked. I was not gifted with the natural skills and ability to

play volleyball. I made the C team during 12u JOs. If you were ever to see pictures of me playing in sixth grade, you would laugh because my knee pads were practically falling down my legs, I was being held up by two twigs, and my feet were probably a solid size 10. But that summer between eighth and ninth grade, I worked on my skills, and it payed off. I dedicated myself to getting better and improving myself, and in that process I learned so much new knowledge and improved many skills.

One of the biggest misconceptions that our society has about success today is that it comes upon people by happenstance or luck, that no one has to work for it. We assume that the gifts and talents people have are simply something they are born with and didn't have to work for. The big problem with this idea of talent being the sole determinant of success is that it doesn't allow for all people to have the opportunity for success. It assumes that success is predetermined, with some destined to reach it and others not so lucky. Gladwell writes about the correlation between talent and success:

The question is this: is there such a thing as innate talent?The obvious answer is yes. Not every hockey player born in January ends up playing at the professional level. Only some do--the innately talented ones. Achievement is talent plus preparation. The problem with this view is that the closer that psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger the role preparation seems to play. (38)

I like when Gladwell says that achievement is talent plus preparation because there are obviously some who are more talented in the beginning than others. However, if those people do not continue to grow their skills, they will start to fall behind.

I tried to look for an example of someone famous who didn't have to work hard for something at some point in their career. As I was looking, I realized that there is no such example. It doesn't exist. There is no example of someone famous who hasn't worked hard *because they didn't work hard*. Anyone with a known name has had to overcome something like failure or rejection and work hard to get past that in order to be where they are today.

Why is it that immigrants or children of immigrants, some of the poorest in America, have the most success? In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Gladwell talks about the work ethic of immigrants who come to America. Gladwell writes of the head of an immigrant family, "When Borgenicht came home at night to his children, he may have been tired and poor and overwhelmed, but he was alive" (149). Borgenicht and his wife were immigrants from Eastern Europe and had experience in the garment industry, eventually started their own garment business in America. They started with one crappy sewing machine and worked their way up to a small business with employees working for them. This shows exactly the immigrant mindset that is referred to in John O'Leary's *Live Inspired* podcast with Brian Buffini. Buffini is an Irish immigrant who came to America and was working six jobs at one point in order to make enough money to sustain himself after being in a terrible car accident. As he worked in real estate, opportunities arose and he always took them no matter how small they seemed. Despite his circumstances early on, Buffini never pitied or felt bad for himself. His hard work got him noticed by more and more clients, and today Buffini has one of the biggest consulting businesses in the world. You see, Brian didn't come to America with the intent of becoming a big real estate mogul. In fact, he really didn't know a thing about the real estate business when he first entered it. But as he worked hard to learn the ropes of the business he picked up skills and relationships

that gave him opportunities down the road (“Realizing the American Dream: ‘Can you Put Your Name on It?’”).

One of the reasons we like to believe that success can come without working hard is that we like the idea of success coming easy to us. We like the idea of not having to do the dirty work. We feel important and respected when we know that we are very good at a skill that someone holds value to, and even more so when we know it is of our natural ability. The idea of reaching success through our own natural skill and ability is invited and even worshipped in society: “Players are judged on their own performance. . . and on the basis of their own ability, not on some other arbitrary fact” (Gladwell 17). The idea of being good at something simply because we are that talented gives us a sense of pride.

Another reason we like the idea of success coming from luck and not hard work is that sometimes we are just plain lazy. In fact, we even concern ourselves over working too hard, as stated by Gladwell, “In the education journals of the day, there were constant worries about overtaxing students or blunting their natural abilities through too much schoolwork” (253). We make excuses *not* to work, saying it will hurt our abilities rather than improve them. We like (especially myself personally) the idea of success being a straight path that we are already fully equipped to take on with no interruptions or change of course, with no need to work on the skills we have or to cultivate new skills. However, as Dave Doherty said to our class, life is like a river, not a straight path, and you may not know where it will take you. There *will* be obstacles and challenges you face on your path to success, and that is where you must take the opportunities to grow as a person. The article “Why Failure is Good for Success” states, “. . . we’re so focused on not failing that we don’t aim for success, settling instead for a life of mediocrity” (Estrem). No

one likes to admit defeat or to accept failure on their journey to success. It is that pride we have within ourselves that wants to believe that we already know everything we need to know and that we already have the skills we need to succeed. We don't! We need to realize that we don't know everything! If we don't have the humility to work hard, lean into the dip, and do the "dirty work," success will not be reached.

When it comes to attaining success, the most important factor Gladwell laid out was getting extraordinary opportunities. While the other factors given - hidden advantages and cultural legacies - also play a big role in success, they are things that are essentially out of our control. Being given the opportunity to work hard or to get in your 10,000 hours is something that is in our control in regards to whether or not we choose to take advantage of those times. In his book *Outliers*, Gladwell writes, "All the outliers we've looked at so far were the beneficiaries of some kind of unusual opportunity. Lucky breaks don't seem like the exception. . . They seem like the rule" (56). Without the opportunity for extra time to learn and improve skills no one will be able to rise above others and become an outlier. One thing that Barb Schmitz talked about when she spoke to our class was to be open to the opportunities that come your way even if they don't seem like much of an opportunity at the time. After a while those opportunities will build up into big advantages. Going out of your way and making a conscious effort to take those small opportunities will also make you more aware when they become present and you will probably be more willing to take bigger opportunities in the future.

The catch with all of this, though, is that that extra practice must be deliberate. K. Anders Ericsson, a Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, says about an experiment he conducted regarding the 10,000 hour rule in terms of mastery of music and chess, "Extensive

experience in a domain does not, however, invariably lead to expert levels of achievement. . .

The effects of mere experience differ greatly from those of Deliberate Practice, where individuals concentrate on actively trying to go beyond their current abilities” (“The Influence of Experience and Deliberate Practice on the Development of Superior Expert Performance” 685-701). The 10,000 hour rule is pretty much void if the practice you are putting in is not deliberately trying to master a certain skill. If you just practice to say you are practicing, then chances are you will not master anything in that time. This idea is reiterated in Cal Newport’s Study Hacks blog: “When it comes to studying, there’s a huge difference between *doing work* and *doing useful work*. If you’re not putting a lot of thought into navigating this distinction, you’re probably mired in the former” (“How I Used Deliberate Practice to Destroy my Computer Science Final”).

If one knows about the skill of deliberate practice, it can be easily seen in the examples Gladwell gives (The Beatles, Bill Joy, Bill Gates). Take The Beatles, who spent long, hard hours practicing different music genres, working on how to blend their sound, and mastering their instruments (47-49). However, someone who is not familiar with the idea of deliberate practice (like myself) would not automatically connect that idea with the 10,000 hour rule.

Many of us like the idea of being successful simply because of our natural ability. We like the idea of things coming easy to us and not having to work hard. It gives us a sense of pride. The problem with that idea is that it predetermines people’s success and doesn’t put into consideration the effort taken to improve one’s abilities. Hard work is a necessary part of becoming successful. No one with fame to their name hasn’t had to work hard for where they are at today. Examples of people who worked hard for what they had would be the Borgenicht

family who came to America from East Europe and started their own garment business from scratch, or The Beatles who put in deliberate practice with their 10,000 hours to improve their skills. Of the three factors given by Gladwell that determine success the most important is extraordinary opportunities, opportunities that give you a leg up above the rest. However, you must be deliberate in seizing those opportunities and making the best use of them because otherwise they may go to waste and you may not get as much out of them as you could.

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